

## I.W. Stevens Historic Site

Prior to the construction of I.W. Stevens' lakeside cottage, Williams Island was owned by the Virginia & Rainy Lake Company. Logging in the future Voyageurs National Park region had begun in earnest in the first few decades of the twentieth century, although in the early years the industry was confined to transporting timber cut in the area by water. The completion of a rail line linking Virginia, Minnesota and Fort Frances, Ontario in 1907 signaled the opening of full scale logging in the Voyageurs region. One of the dominant operations in the region was the Virginia & Rainy Lake Company, based out of Cusson, Minnesota. By 1909, the company was fully engaged in extracting white pine timber from northern St. Louis County.

Sometime in the early decades of the twentieth century, the company built a "headquarters" on a small peninsula of land located on an island in Namakan Lake. The island, variously known as Hines or Williams Island after the officers of the company, was about 400 acres. The camp consisted of thirteen tar paper shacks and a 49 foot tarpaper lodge. The white and Norway pines on the island were saved from the loggers' axes that decimated the pine forests of the area. Lumber buyers came from the Twin Cities, Milwaukee, and Chicago to inspect the operation and stayed at the headquarters camp. By the late 1920s, the Virginia & Rainy Lake Company was winding up its operations in the northern border lakes, and began liquidating its property. Although most camps were dismantled, the tarpaper shacks of the headquarters camp were left for their next owner.<sup>1</sup>

In 1932, Ingvald Walter Stevens purchased the island. Stevens, born in 1885, was a native of Norway who had first come to America around 1904. After working in various places, including North Dakota and southern Minnesota, Stevens settled in Hibbing for 13 years, working as the shoe department manager of the Itasca Bazaar Company.<sup>2</sup> A bout with ulcers convinced Stevens that he should spend some time relaxing, and he looked towards the lakeshore of northern Minnesota, where he had previously vacationed. Stevens contacted the Virginia & Rainy Lake Company, who showed him a number of properties they had for sale. He chose the former headquarters property, and bought the 400 acre island for \$1500.<sup>3</sup> According to his diary, Stevens arrived at his new property on May 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1932, and immediately set about remodeling one of the shacks as his residence.<sup>4</sup>

When Stevens arrived at what he came to call Pine Cove, or Pine Covia, recreational tourism to the northern border lakes was in full swing. Recreational travel to the northern areas of Minnesota had begun as early as the 1880s, but in those early years the lack of transportation and affordable facilities for visitors had limited tourism to wealthy tourists and outdoor adventurers attracted by the area's remoteness and opportunities for fishing and hunting. These visitors generally built their own seasonal cottages and estates, or patronized the few small-scale lodges and resorts that catered to them. As time progressed, better transportation routes and changing demographics in the country began bringing greater numbers of middle-class tourist to the area. Lakeside cottage owners usually arrived in the northern border lakes from Midwestern cities and towns to experience the remoteness and relaxation afforded by the natural environment of the area. The cottage sites they occupied were usually small and typically consisted of a few acres with a cabin located on a breezy point facing the lake, tucked in among the trees. Access to the early lakeside cottages was chiefly by water, although later improvements and extensions to the roads brought increasing numbers of automobile tourists to mainland areas.

In his early years on the island, Stevens also took advantage of the growing resort trade in the area to construct a couple of vacation cabins on his island. Like his fellow resort owners at Monson's Hoist Bay and Meadwood Lodge, smaller family owned and operated resorts like Stevens' catered to tourists who appreciated the remoteness of the northwoods but preferred to have the basic comforts offered by resorts, including furnished cabins and catered meals. Stevens' operation was always small and constituted a great deal of extra work for him, as he had to fetch his guests from the mainland and do all the work of catering to them without laborsaving devices such as laundry machines. Stevens jokingly referred to the resort as the "Slave Farm." He discontinued the operation in 1959.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the tarpaper shack which he remodeled as his residence, Stevens built a number of additional buildings and structures. As a Norwegian, a sauna was one of his first improvements, constructed around 1935 with the assistance of Waino and Eino Lahti. The following year, the Lahti brothers also helped Stevens construct the log cabin on the point.<sup>6</sup> At some point in these early years, Stevens also constructed an ice house, a necessity in an era of no refrigeration. He spent the winter of 1937 building bookshelves for his house. His first paying visitors arrived in the summer of 1937, although the log cabin had no chimney until the following year. Stevens built two further vacation cabins by himself, the "new" cabin in 1938 and the "honeymoon" cabin in 1946.<sup>7</sup>

Although the island was never wired for electricity, Stevens purchased a used generator in 1945 and built a shed for it, so he could wire the cabins for electric lights (he took down the electric wires in 1964 and used propane gas thereafter). He initially cooked on a wood range and used ice to preserve his supplies, but in later years he installed propane gas tanks and secured a gas range and refrigerators. Stevens was relieved he no longer had to harvest ice every winter (he demolished the ice house in 1963). With the tourist business ongoing, Stevens built a new dock on the north side of the peninsula for use by his guests in 1948.<sup>8</sup>

Living at such a remote location, Stevens mostly "did" for himself. In the early years, walleye were abundant and he often shot deer to supplement his garden produce and the hundreds of quarts of blueberries he picked. In later times, the walleye stocks declined and Stevens chose not to hunt deer, although he would always shoot a bear if it wandered into his front yard. After a short summer, Stevens would stock up on all necessities in the late fall, and usually have enough supplies to last him until the following spring. He had to rebuild his root cellar several times, including 1958 and 1973.<sup>9</sup>

Life on the island was hard work; Stevens had to haul water in buckets, chop firewood, and grind the flour for his bread. In the winter he established a ski trail to Moose Bay with markers, so he could reach his mail at Ash River. Spring was busy with preparing his garden, chopping wood, and getting the boats ready. In the summer Stevens tended his garden and picked berries, repaired or built new equipment, and, during his resort days, catered to his guests. Fall was the time for harvesting the garden, lying in provisions, and preparing his cottage for the winter.<sup>10</sup>

Stevens' free time (after performing his usual chores and any repairs that were needed) was taken up by listening to the radio, playing cards, and typing his letters and diaries. He loved to watch the local wildlife, especially the birds. Although Stevens claimed never to be lonely, even in the deep of winter, he had occasional rarely left his property.<sup>11</sup> In his later years on the island, he spent several months with relatives in California, and he enjoyed a brief period of notoriety

when several newspaper articles were written about him in the mid 1970s; one even made its way to Norway, where he still had relatives living. Stevens received several hundred letters as a result, and answered them all.<sup>12</sup> It was only in 1976 that a telephone line was run to the island. When Voyageurs National Park purchased his property, Stevens retained a life lease on the island. Although Stevens once wrote that he would rather stop living than leave his island, in October of 1979 he packed up his cabin and departed, at the age of 94. For the final years of his life, he lived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota with a nephew, reading, walking, and watching television. Stevens died in 1989 at the age of 104, and was buried in Hills, Minnesota.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mary Lou Pearson, "Oral History Interview with Ingvald Walter Stevens," June 24, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Obituary, I. W. Stevens. Newspaper clipping, ca. 1989, no publication or date.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Dale Vickery, "Minnesota Viking," *Backpacking Journal* Spring 1978, 84.

<sup>4</sup> I. W. Stevens, *Fifty Years in the Minnesota North Country* (diary excerpts), 1984.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Judy Blais, "Living Alone on Namakan at 91," *International Falls Daily Journal*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> I. W. Stevens, *Fifty Years in the Minnesota North Country* (diary excerpts), 1984.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Jim Dale Vickery, "Minnesota Viking," *Backpacking Journal* Spring 1978, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> Obituary, I. W. Stevens. Newspaper clipping, ca. 1989, no publication or date.

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